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Keeping Kids in School

SUMMARY REPORT

The National Youth Literacy Demonstration Project

The New School Canada:
A Comprehensive Approach to Building Literacy Skills, Academic Knowledge, and the Behaviours Required for Success in School and in Life

Sponsoring Organizations

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Research Funding Provided by

National Literacy Secretariat
Crime Prevention Centre
Vancouver Foundation
VanCity Foundation

Operational Funding Provided by

School District 36 (Surrey)

Replication Support Available

Because of the program's success, public and private funders are encouraging other districts and private literacy providers to adopt similar approaches to assisting at-risk youth gain essential skills. Funds are available to provide orientation, training and technical assistance to a select number of schools and organizations.

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Lee Weinstein, New School Principal

A significant number of children leave elementary school without the literacy skills required to succeed in higher grades. Not being able to keep up, many students tune out, act out, and then drop out. Figuring out how to keep these kids in school and how to help them build the skills needed to succeed is an ongoing challenge for districts across Canada.

Overview

For the past three years, Literacy BC and School District 36 (Surrey) have operated a demonstra-tion classroom for at-risk youth aged 15 to 16 with significant literacy difficulties. The youth had either dropped out of school or were highly likely to do so because of their low attendance, behavioural issues, and failure to complete previous grades.

The program has been remarkably successful at accomplishing its goals. Students have stayed in school, developed necessary skills, and moved back into traditional and alternative high school classes with a high likelihood of graduating. Because of its success, District 36 has institutionalized the program, doubled its size, and is actively encouraging other districts to adopt its promising practices.

The New School Canada

A Comprehensive Approach to Building Literacy Skills, Academic Knowledge, and the Behaviours Required for Success in School and in Life

School Dropout Rates and Lack of Skills Development are an Ongoing National Concern

According to the HRDC *Youth in Transition Survey*, approximately 15% of Canadian men and 9% of women do not attain a high school diploma by the time they are 20 years old. Many fail to graduate at all and still others graduate but do not have the basic skills required for today's economy.

> ***"A significant minority of Canadian children are not developing the skills and ability to learn that will help them live and work to their full potential."***
>
> *Knowledge Matters, Skills and Learning for Canadians*, Government of Canada

A common reason for the academic and related behavioural difficulties that many adolescents encounter is that they do not learn to read by the time they complete third grade. This is where traditional education shifts from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." Any child whose reading skills are significantly lagging at that time faces an uphill challenge.

Lack of adequate literacy skills inhibits academic progress across the board in all subjects, since students must acquire most knowledge through reading. Once students enter the higher grades, little is offered in terms of scaffolding, hands-on learning, individualized assistance, or technology-mediated instruction. As a result, a strength of many of these students – the ability to learn in ways that are not dependent on print – does not come into play. Often, competence and confidence decrease in equal measure, leading to reduced self-esteem, increased frustration, and high levels of anger.

Few resources are available for students who have reading difficulties but are not designated as having learning disabilities. Alternative programs, often designed for students who have behavioural challenges but can learn independently through the use of print modules, do not work for these students, since these programs require the very reading skills the students lack. Without assistance that speaks directly to their multiple needs (literacy skills, academic knowledge, social-emotional development, and behavioural change), the future for these students is far from bright.

The Kids

They don't seem to have much in common: the withdrawn kid in the back of the class who says little and does less, the tough one who shows up rarely and then apparently only to intimidate, and the silly kid who can't sit still and leave others alone. But in many cases the common trait among these kids is their inability to read well enough to keep up in class. Most kids would rather be the hoodlum, the cutup or the weird one in the back than the "dummy."

In interviews with the students who participated in the demonstration classroom, early reading problems consistently were identified as leading to disengagement with school and subsequent behavioural difficulties. Low self-esteem, frustration, and undirected anger characterized many of the students.

The youth who were recruited to participate in the demonstration classroom were generally aged 15 to 16 and were nominally eligible for grade 10, although most had not passed a class in several years. They had either dropped out of school or were judged by teachers, counsellors and parents as likely to do so.

A number of the students had criminal records and had participated in illegal activities such as car theft, drug dealing, and street violence. A majority of the students had experienced physical violence either as perpetrators, victims or both. Some students had insecure and threatening home lives while others had stable homes and supportive parents. The average

reading level of students entering the program in the first two years (as determined by the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test) was below grade 6. None of the students reported that they read for pleasure. Many indicated they had never read a book.

> ***"I had never read a book in my life until I came to this school. I was assigned novels in elementary and in high school but I never read them. I just read the backs of the books or I'd look it up on the Internet. I think a huge part of that was, well, I don't like when people tell me what to do and especially if I don't like that person and I didn't like the teachers at high school at all but the teachers here are awesome. We had to read five or ten minutes at the beginning of every class. At first I'd just pretend to read but then I'd start getting into it and that's when it began. I think that's when I sort of changed to a way better attitude. I started actually talking more. Just because of the reading I would feel more comfortable around students and the teachers and I'd leave myself open more."***
>
> Student with chronic truancy problems.
>
> ***"By the way, so far, in school I've got nothing but perfect scores on all my assignments."***
>
> Email from same student during his first semester back in regular high school classes.

The Intervention

There is limited research on what works in building literacy skills in high school age youth and few positive examples. The issues are complex. Not only must students learn the fundamentals of reading and writing, but they need to learn key background information they missed in earlier grades, and, perhaps most importantly, they must overcome their anger and apathy to develop positive attitudes and behaviours required for learning.

After reviewing the literature on adolescent literacy and examining key strategies that seemed to produce positive results, Literacy BC and School District 36 determined to design, operate and refine a learning model based on promising practices and the best judgement of the research and development team. This research and development model became the New School Canada.

The research combined qualitative and quantitative measures in a modified case study approach. It was participatory and collaborative, involving the program staff (teacher, teacher aide, and counsellor), school principal, and a research team that documented classes, gathered and analyzed data, and provided guidance, analysis, materials, and support.

It was clear from the beginning that the program would need to be a comprehensive model that addressed not just academic issues but social-emotional and behavioural issues as well. Moreover, the model would need to meet the practical constraints of the school district, not the least of which was budgetary.

The demonstration classroom enrolled its first students in September 2002. The original model, a one-year literacy-focused program, evolved to become a two-year literacy and grade 10 academic program. Now in its third year of operation, the classroom is a highly effective model that keeps kids in school, prepares them for grade 11, and builds the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviours required to succeed in high school and life as an adult.

The Results

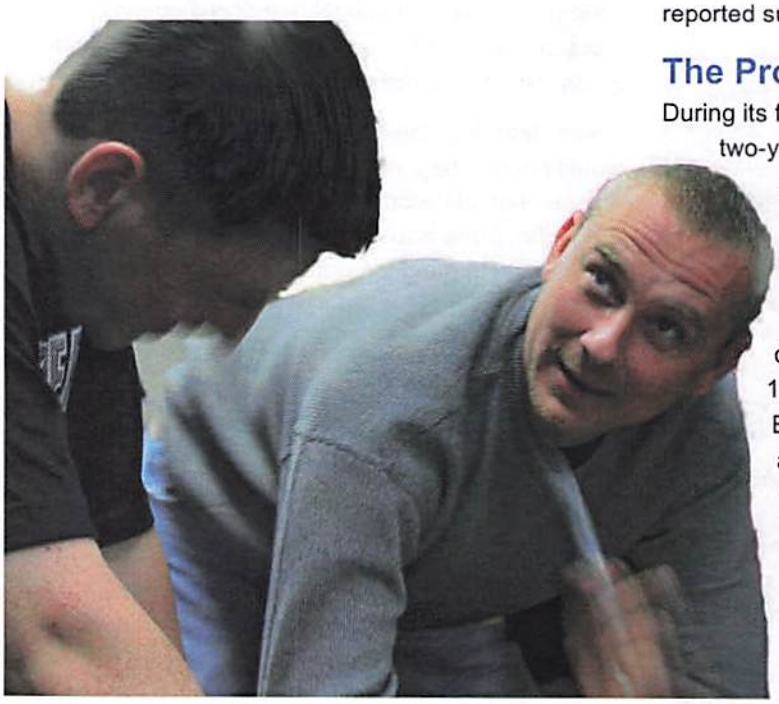
The model was highly successful although not equally so with all students. The first year of operation provided the most challenges. Initial recruitment efforts resulted in some students who had behavioural issues but no literacy problems and others who had neurological damage from FAS and physical trauma that prevented them from learning. The program was inappropriate for these students. But, for the most part, the program was successful with its target group: students with significant literacy problems and related negative behaviours who, nevertheless, have the ability to learn.

Attendance Indicators

Attendance is a key indicator of success. Put simply, if students are not in school, they cannot learn. Since all of the students had major truancy problems, positive attendance was considered to be a primary measure of engagement. Although students who enrolled in the first year achieved an average attendance rate above 76% (a significant improvement over their previous performance) those who enrolled in year two of the program did substantially better by maintaining an attendance level above 90%.

Reading Indicators

Gains in literacy skills are also a key indicator of success. The first group of students who had completed two years in the program improved their scores in passage comprehension (the essence of what it means to read) by an average of 3.4 grades. The students who had enrolled in the second year improved their passage comprehension scores by an average of 2.1 years in their first year. These are significant increases, especially since achieving improvement among adolescents on standardized reading tests has proven elusive in previous studies.. Perhaps of equal importance as an indicator of success: all students had begun reading for pleasure, something few had ever done before.



Retention and Transition

Although the program was not originally designed as a two-year model, half of the first year students chose to return for a second year. Of these, approximately 80% completed the year and all but two (who chose to go to work) went on to continue their high school classes. Retention was far greater in students who enrolled in the second year. Of the twenty students enrolled in the class, only one was lost until late in the spring, when three other students dropped out because of an incident that occurred outside of school. All of the remaining students returned for the second year (a notable achievement given the turmoil that characterized many of the students' lives). The students who transitioned to other high school programs after two years in the demonstration classroom have reported success which is verified by their teachers.

The Program Model

During its first year, the program evolved to become a two-year model that emphasizes skill building in year one and academic subjects in year two. The first year of the program focuses on building literacy skills, gaining background academic knowledge, developing study skills, and exploring art and technology. The second year provides a complete 10th grade academic program, including English, math, science, social studies and art. Building literacy skills and social and emotional development are emphasized throughout the two-year period. Students completing the second year program transfer into standard 11th grade classes or other alternative high school programs.

Key Characteristics

- Explicit instruction of literacy skills
- Pre-academic and academic instruction
- Team teaching, low student to teacher ratio
- Full-time counsellor included in team
- Emphasis on social-emotional development
- Family involvement and support
- Progressive discipline
- Collaborative case management
- Adapted texts for background knowledge
- Supportive and safe environment
- Integration of literacy and academic skills
- Project-based learning with technology
- Arts as a vehicle for literacy development
- Transition support